

The Empress Matilda and Motherhood in Popular Fiction, 1970s to the Present

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The Empress Matilda, Lady of the English, is a well-known entity to scholars and historians. The daughter of the English King Henry I, Matilda was married at a young age to the Holy Roman Emperor Heinrich V. After the deaths of her only legitimate brother and her husband, she was called back to England by her father, named his heir, and married again to the young Geoffrey, Count of Anjou. Nevertheless, on her father's death in 1135, her first cousin Stephen took the throne, pulling England and Normandy into nearly twenty years of civil war between Stephen's and Matilda's factions. The unrest was effectively ended in 1153 with Stephen declaring Matilda's son Henry his heir. Henry took the throne upon Stephen's death in 1154 and ruled for thirty-five years as Henry II. Matilda, from her 'retirement' in Normandy, provided political and diplomatic support to Henry until her death in 1167.

With such an impressive resume—Empress of the Holy Roman Empire, Countess of Anjou, Lady of the English, her pre-coronation title, to say nothing of her roles as an administrator, diplomat, courtier, and skilled governor—Matilda also received due attention by historians in her time in both positive and negative ways. She appears in the contemporary *Gesta Stephani*, a work clearly not in her favour. The contemporary Wace also did not like her much. This is in contrast to Robert of Torigni's more favorable Appendix to *Sigebert Chronicle*. Geoffrey of Monmouth can be read as smoothing the way for her future queenship, while the slightly later Matthew Paris relegates her to gender-appropriate sidelines.¹ But despite a rich historiographical tradition, the bare bones of which are above, Matilda comes down to modern popular culture as a forgotten queen and one who needs to get written back into history. I would argue that Paris' sidelining Matilda into roles more gender normative for thirteenth-century western Europe, alongside a crucial translation of the anti-Matildan *Gesta Stephani* in the pre-second wave-feminist 1950s², have collectively done

more damage to Matilda's modern, popular reputation and reclamation than any other factor. Indeed Potter's use of the word "haughty" in his translation of the *Gesta Stephani* has come to have a great impact on modern perceptions of Matilda, despite more recent revisionist and feminist-influenced studies that more favorably reassess Matilda's role as a ruler.³ Indeed the survival of around 100 of her charters from Germany, Normandy and the bulk from England 1141-1154⁴ made possible a reevaluation of Matilda as a woman with a significant and active concern in governing. These charters provided a crucial contrast to the chroniclers in order to reconsider Matilda as a skilled diplomat who was trained for medieval leadership and had the potential for doing so.

However, a historiographic tradition that placed Matilda into a sidelined category at best gave rise to the concept that the historic Matilda was "forgotten," or overlooked in contemporary as well as modern times. Indeed this has not been the case. And much in the same way that scholars of a pre-feminism time, including those in the medieval, felt the need to compress Matilda into a gender normative category that was accepted in their time—or flout her flouting of accepted gender norms as something inherently wrong—without a full understanding of the historiographic tradition of Matilda popular culture in the post-feminism⁵ period modern, fiction writers find a Matilda ready for reception into a feminist norm that best suited contemporary popular feminism. One place where this compression into feminist ideals becomes obvious is in the attitudes of the fictive Matilda towards motherhood. Being and becoming a mother, providing an heir to either of the two ruling families she belonged, would have been a primary concern to the historical Matilda. But this does not overshadow modern fiction writers expressing their modern attitudes about motherhood by overlaying it on the fictive Matilda. As Kate Ellie has pointed out, "The shift backward in time [in historical fiction] is...a [means by] which present behavior is given history and validity."⁶ By placing current practice and ideas into a long-distant past, a veritable dark ages

for the modern world, post-feminist writing solidified current stances on motherhood by seeking its mirror in the past. By doing this via the persona of a fictive Matilda, the writing overlays modern ideals on a woman who tends to be seen via Victorian ideas of Matilda's life such as in Agnes Strickland's *The Lives of the Queens of England*⁷ and that crucial 1950 translation of the *Gesta Stephani*. But just as these historical writers placed Matilda into the positions they saw most appropriate for their times, in compressing Matilda into feminist-specific norms, does modern fiction ultimately do any better or worse than Paris and Strickland in insisting on a Matilda that fits the paradigm best for their time?

There are surprisingly few modern fiction novels featuring Matilda as the heroine, and this particularly in comparison to other historical figures who have been heavily appropriated for modern, feminist popular fiction; here I need only say "Eleanor of Aquitaine" or "Anne Boleyn." This may be a matter of sources and reputation; Eleanor, even in her own time, had a colorful reputation, and there is an embarrassment of sources available for writers of the Tudor period as opposed to twelfth-century England. By contrast to these later queens, Matilda appears in only a handful of novels as protagonist. Of these I have identified only three reached any sort of wide readership, which were selected for study: Jean Plaidy's *The Passionate Enemies*;⁸ Sharon Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept*;⁹ and Elizabeth Chadwick's *Lady of the English*.¹⁰ These three novels fortuitously cover a range from the mid-1970s to 2011, providing a canvas upon which second- and third-wave feminism paints Matilda and motherhood.¹¹ Indeed in this range of novels we see a clear representation of Matilda as a feminist stalwart, and thus a fictive character who reflects modern attitudes and concerns about motherhood through the voice of an appropriated woman to whom motherhood would have played a certain part of her own career.

The first post-feminism Matilda to hit the bookshelves was Plaidy's *The Passionate Enemies* in 1976. The choice of Matilda was perhaps an axiomatic one for Plaidy, who liked

to focus on “women of integrity and strong character” who were also “struggling for liberation, fighting for their own survival.”¹² Allison Wright has written about Tudor women in historical fiction in the 1970s, saying, “Advancement, achievement, public power and private satisfaction: these are women who have it all, the prototypes, perhaps of the 1980s Women of Substance,”¹³ though this is equally true of Plaidy’s Matilda. This Matilda is cold, manipulative, capable of recognizing love but more excited by power, and often conflates her own power with her desire for her rival, Stephen. She not only enjoys sex, but actively uses it to manipulate Stephen in power-plays.

Matilda’s attitudes towards children and indeed motherhood run along the same lines throughout the novel: children are another tool to be used in her quest for power, despite later admittances of love for her sons. At the start of the novel she is pleased that she never had a son by her husband, the Holy Roman Emperor, who is portrayed as weak, feeble, and old—someone who is clearly no match for Matilda.¹⁴ Her intentions are to leave Germany for England as soon as her elderly husband has died. She has no use for the Empire, and having children by Heinrich V would have only tied her to a place where she did not want to be. She is portrayed as stuck with her senile husband, and actively longs for her stepmother to remain barren in order for Matilda herself to gain the inheritance of the throne of England.¹⁵

Children, in this moment, are anathema to Matilda in two ways and by two people: if she bears a child by her husband, the emperor, she would be stuck to the Empire as regent for a young son rather than returned to England, where her ambitions lie. However, this desire is also contingent on her stepmother Adelicia remaining childless by Henry II, Matilda’s father. All of Matilda’s wishes, at this point, are for childless marriages for the both of them.

Matilda’s attitude does not soon change, though her circumstance does. Following her husband’s death, and her father declaring her the heir to the English throne, her duties are made perfectly clear: “You are now heir to the throne,” Henry II tells her, “and your first duty

as such will be to provide the heirs the country needs.”¹⁶ Matilda’s marriage to Geoffrey of Anjou is not the solution Matilda had wished, desiring Stephen as she does, and nor does her affair with Stephen progress as she wished. At this point in the novel, by Matilda’s return to the Anglo-Norman realm, she has already spotted Stephen as a future sparring partner, metaphorically speaking, with each remembering their immense attraction to the other in their youth. They move in that direction, though all does not go smoothly. In fact, when Stephen is kept from a tryst with Matilda due to the illness and ultimate death of his son, Matilda ruminates how nothing goes in her favor: her sexual conquest was more important than the health and life of a child.¹⁷ At this time she further considers the consequences of the impending affair with Stephen: should she become pregnant by him, she would have to give her husband a love potion to make him sleep with her, as their marriage was as yet unconsummated due to their immense hatred of each other.¹⁸

This circumstance too rapidly changes. Henry threatens to disinherit her if she does not start bearing children. For a woman as ambitious as Matilda, this is an unacceptable circumstance although she recognizes firstly that she would be giving birth for her father’s sake, not her own, and secondly, that her only desire to become a mother would be with Stephen’s child. She becomes determined to become pregnant as quickly as possible, to ease her father’s anger and insure her own inheritance.¹⁹ She becomes suddenly amiable with Geoffrey: she takes his hand and leads him to bed, stating calmly, “Come now, we must have a child.”²⁰ This, of course, makes the potential complications of the forthcoming tryst with Stephen less knotty. Indeed within a page of Matilda bedding Geoffrey, she and Stephen do so as well. Matilda finds it exciting that a child born of she and Stephen will be king of England, and realizes that having sex with Stephen made bearable having sex with Geoffrey. “Does Stephen’s seed live within me? Shall it be his son or Geoffrey’s who inherits the throne?” she asks herself in a reflective, post-coital moment.²¹

Indeed Matilda is soon pregnant, though her pregnancy and the birth of her son, the future Henry II, is told entirely away from her point of view. In fact, the pregnancy and birth is told through the eyes of her father, to whom the heir is of utmost importance.²² Matilda's second pregnancy and childbirth is also told through Henry's eyes, even though this second birth nearly kills her in the process.²³ Highlighting the layers of ambition and love between Matilda and her own father, Henry prays for the weak and ill Matilda "not for love of her but for his grandson and the need to preserve the country he loved."²⁴ Children are as the means to the ends. In this way as well the entirety of the process of Matilda becoming a mother is pointed out to be less important to her and more important to her father. Taking these scenes away from Matilda's point of view compounds the idea that to Matilda, motherhood and children are a tool for her own ends. Indeed it is only shortly after the birth of her second son that pregnancy stops being a mere tool to Matilda, and actively becomes a hindrance. When she learns that her cousin and lover Stephen has usurped her English throne she flies into a rage not only because of this, but also because she is again pregnant, a "handicap" to her campaigns and driving her to further rely on her hated husband.²⁵ She decides she is having no more children: she has given her husband and father three sons, and will now only focus on the crown.²⁶

Despite this, there is a certain amount of time spent after the birth of her first son on rumination that motherhood made Matilda loveable.²⁷ This too is through the eyes of her father, who is portrayed as a doting and indulgent grandfather. Matilda, it was noted, was proud of her children but "there was little of the softness of a mother about her."²⁸ The children, again, are means to an end, and although Henry seems to soften his stance on the importance of heirs, allowing himself to love and indulge them, Matilda rests on pride in her sons and heirs as a part of her strategy to appease her father and retain her own inheritance. Indeed, she and Geoffrey plan to manipulate Henry to hand over castles as his grandson's

inheritance, and do so while he is “in the nursery drooling over Henry...we shall ask him, since he is always saying how much he loves the boy, to show his affection in a more practical form.”²⁹ Castles given to the young Henry would bolster his own position in the inheritance scheme, but in the short term, Matilda and Geoffrey holding these castles on young Henry’s behalf was the more immediate goal.

Towards the end of the novel, the young Henry again is used as a tool by his mother, taking another tack: when manipulating her way out of Arundel Castle, she not only uses sex with Stephen as a part of her plans, but drops the hint that her eldest son might be Stephen’s, not Geoffrey’s.³⁰ This, combined with the overwhelming nature of their sexual encounters, helps persuade Stephen to release Matilda from Arundel and grant her safe passage to her supporters in Bristol. This tactic proves ultimately to be an unerring success on Matilda’s part: throughout the rest of the novel, when faced with challenges in regards to the young Henry, Stephen constantly has in the back of his head the idea that the boy could be his. When young Henry is stranded without means to return to Anjou, Stephen actually sends him money to assist him on the basis that if he must be helped, then a father should be helpful.³¹ When a decisive and no doubt destructive battle is to take place between the King’s forces and those of the young Henry, Matilda appears to Stephen—disguised as a peasant no less—and plays the son card once again: “I love you and I love my son...your son,”³² she tells him in order to save both lives, though at this point her sincerity must certainly be doubted by the reader.

Children or at least the concept of children in *The Passionate Enemies* is a constant strand in the narrative and character development, and despite Matilda’s coldness her power-hungry attitude plays into the overall feeling of her as a 1970s career-oriented woman, one who does not let motherhood or children get in the way of her ambitions. This can partly be time and place of the writing. It has been shown that the period between 1968 and 1973 was

the only time when feminist writing produced relatively negative assessments of motherhood.³³ Alongside this, in the mid-1970s, women had unprecedented control over their reproductive rights. The pill had been made available through the National Health Service in Britain in 1961 and had been approved by the Food and Drug Administration in the United States in 1960. The impact of this alongside *Roe v. Wade*³⁴ in the US and the UK Abortion Act³⁵ should not be understated: women were moving, for the first time, into a world where better healthcare access and procedures would give them control of the time if they would become mothers, if at all. The tension between the perception of a medieval mother and heir to a throne, to whom child-bearing would have conventionally been paramount, and the 1970s ideas of reproduction health plays on the field of this fictional Matilda: she had to be a mother, as historical fact and conventional wisdom dictated, but she didn't have to like it. The fictitious Matilda of *The Passionate Enemies* implicitly pointed out to her readers that there were new options about motherhood in the modern world, and reminded the modern reader that these were not a choice in the twelfth century.

The next outing of Matilda in the 1990s show a woman drastically changed from the woman of the 1970s. The Matilda of Sharon Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept* is a victim, a woman whose reputation for arrogance and control is explained by spousal abuse and her inner turmoil. This is a Matilda whose arrogance is no longer acceptable as rote fact, but explained away by personal tragedy and abuse. We are introduced to her feelings about motherhood quickly in the 1000-page novel: in the course of an argument with Geoffrey, we are told of her son by her first husband, the emperor, who died as a baby, and she trembles and cries at the thought of this lost child.³⁶ She wishes for more children but not by Geoffrey, instigating a violent fight between the two; though shortly thereafter Matilda begs Geoffrey for reconciliation on the basis that both need an heir.³⁷ Children to this Matilda are not only a dynastic necessity, but something she actively and emotionally desires.

Indeed within a number of pages we find Matilda pregnant, ruminating on her own previous and tragic experience with childbirth, and discussing her pregnancy with her future rival, Stephen. Matilda is concerned about being a good mother; she does not want to be distant as her own mother was; she wants only sons as she does not want her daughters being pawns as she was.³⁸ Soon enough Matilda is pregnant again, but as the political situation in England has transpired against her she ruminates that being pregnant is bad timing as men would not trust a woman ruler with a swollen belly, and she further compares being pregnant—eating for two—with going to war on behalf of her son—fighting for two.³⁹ Matilda's own power and rulership, in these early days of struggle and fighting, is already intimately tied up in her own motherhood and protection of her beloved son Henry. The concept of fighting on her own behalf, for her own throne, is only a part of her ambitions, and those mostly for the power to be free of her abuse rather than to hold power for its own sake.

This Matilda interestingly tends to strongly express a concern about what we, in modern parlance, would call a work/life balance. She is extraordinarily concerned about her relationship with her sons whilst she is leading the struggle in England; her young sons, of course, have remained behind in Anjou. This would not have been an unusual experience in the Middle Ages: elite motherhood, though not necessarily emotionally disengaged, involved a certain amount of physical distance.⁴⁰ In the novel Matilda's struggle with her distance from her sons starts to be expressed around the age that her oldest son, the future Henry II, would have been around seven: Matilda receives a letter from him that causes sadness about her inability to be with her sons. "I've not seen my sons for more than a year...If this war drags on long enough, I'll not even know them upon my return. They'll be strangers..." she sighs to her trusted friend Brien fitzCount.⁴¹ Brien, being an understanding modern man in the guise of a twelfth-century nobleman, sympathizes that "she'd never get back the time she'd lost with her sons."⁴² At several points Matilda conflates her impending rule with her

own sense of being a mother. When waiting for her coronation at London, Matilda attributes her well-known ire for the Londoners for their causing the delay of her coronation and thus her reunion with her son: "...That is four more months away from my sons...I wanted [Henry] to be here for my coronation, to watch the Archbishop set upon my head the crown that will one day be his. But the Londoners have denied me that. And yet you wonder...why I love them not? Just put that question to my eight-year-old son if you truly need an answer!"⁴³ Her status as mother to a son and her status as contender for the throne are not even: her motherhood is a certainty whilst her throne is not. In the framework of a woman steeped in third-wave feminism, Matilda's concerns and complaints echo that of modern working mothers, worried about the time spent at work to support children versus the time actually spent with those children. She actively places her status as a mother over her status as a potential queen.

The ties between young Henry and Matilda's struggles are often also made explicit, in contrast to notions of Matilda fighting for her own patrimony. Her desire to rule, early in the book, is connected specifically to her desire to be free of a controlling father and an abusing husband,⁴⁴ but upon the birth of her eldest son these reasons rapidly become replaced with her realization that Henry was as important, if not more, to the fight for the crown than she was. Henry himself connects these dots: as a boy, in a fight with his younger brother, Henry instructs him that the crown was "Mama's and mine."⁴⁵ At one point during the struggle Matilda ruminates, "Sometimes I wonder where I will be in five years. Will I still be at Gloucester or Bristol, clinging to my shredded hopes whilst Stephen clings to his stolen crown? All I know for [certain] is that in five years, Henry will be almost thirteen."⁴⁶ At several points Matilda directly legitimizes the destruction the war is wreaking by linking its righteousness to the future rule of her son. Fighting for her son made justifiable the ruin of cities like Winchester and the death and destruction that the war has caused.⁴⁷ Nearly half-

way through the early battles, Matilda realizes that her own brother, Robert of Gloucester, has been fighting all along for Henry, not for her sake.⁴⁸ But in fact, this is also the crucial moment when she realizes, despite her own association between her crown and her son, that she too is fighting for Henry, not for herself. This is early in the historical narrative: 1141, after her loss in London and the destruction of Winchester. But from this point Henry is twined with the crown and the fighting to the degree that in several points towards the end of the narrative, Henry is not even referred to by name, but becomes “Maude’s son.”⁴⁹ Choosing to refer to Henry this way reminds the reader of his maternal identity, the close association with his mother’s power and his mother’s willingness to risk all for his power, but also powerfully ties Matilda’s struggle to be that for Henry, not herself.

Motherhood, in several points, is also displayed as a competition to Matilda in her relationship with her husband Geoffrey. Geoffrey of Anjou is hardly a romantic medieval hero in *Penman*: we learn in the first parts of the novel that he cruelly beats and rapes Matilda, leaving her with bruises and split lips, with a face “swollen like a melon”⁵⁰ and needing “powder to cover her wounds”⁵¹ before being seen by others. Though their tension is never reconciled, it is once again motherhood that provides a balm to their relationship; their first child is noted as bringing Matilda and Geoffrey closer.⁵² But this temporary closeness becomes competition for the children’s affection. Geoffrey proved to be an attentive father and “a real rival for the affection of their sons...and of all the wrongs he’d done her, that was the greatest wrong of all.”⁵³ When Matilda is successful at Lincoln her immediate thought is not only of bringing her sons to England but that she would never have to step foot in Anjou again; presumably, this indicates her intention to raise her sons in England, away from Anjou and Geoffrey, who is not invited to join her in England.⁵⁴ This is a tension and a competition that does not go unnoticed by other characters. When Geoffrey dies, the adult Henry holds the funeral too quickly for Matilda to be able to attend. She realizes in rapid order that he was

afraid she would have refused but assures Henry that would not have been true, though she knows herself that she would have only attended for Henry's sake, not her husband's.⁵⁵ But ultimately this too causes Matilda to consider her parental competition: the "final victory had been Geoffrey's. She knew that her sons loved and respected her...But she doubted that they'd have grieved as much for her as they now grieved for Geoffrey."⁵⁶ Despite her years of fighting on behalf of her eldest, Matilda ultimately feels a failure at motherhood for having lost the competition to her husband for her children's affection.

The Matilda of Penman rejects notions of 1970s and 1980s career-oriented ethos of feminism, the concept of power-above-all seen in the Plaidy, for a softer Matilda to whom a work/life balance is apparently a problem. This is a Matilda as well who does not reflect a greater third-wave plurality; it is largely considered, of course, that the ability to work outside the home and the stresses alongside this reflect the white, middle-class feminism of the post-1950s.⁵⁷ However, this is also a Matilda who reflects an increase of feminist writing on motherhood in the late 1970s and 1980s, and particularly reflects the partnership of women's health activists, counterculture and cultural feminism to promote motherhood in positive terms.⁵⁸ In feminist writing in this time, motherhood became a unifying issue between refractive concepts of feminism.⁵⁹ Motherhood to this Matilda is less a practical means-to-end and more something emotive, something that becomes the *raison d'être* for Matilda's own political fight. In rejecting the ideas of the importance of her own autonomous authority, this Matilda becomes a mouthpiece for the importance of a close relationship with one's children, the imperative notion that employment should not interfere with being a mother.

The last Matilda is the most recent one: from Elizabeth Chadwick's 2011 novel *Lady of the English*. This novel distinguishes itself firstly in its very approach and presentation: as opposed to a singular focus on Matilda herself, this novel approaches its narrative through the dual personalities of Matilda and her stepmother, Adeliza of Louvain. Traditional

motherhood itself plays a small role in the novel though concepts and representations of mothers, motherhood and fertility are imbedded throughout the novel.

Adeliza is the first to introduce motherhood to the narrative, and this is unsurprising as, as the second wife of Henry I, her entire role as queen was to bear a male heir. Adeliza first appears within the opening pages of the novel, with Henry atop of her as she waits through sex patiently but not pleasurably. Adeliza thinks about Henry's "slippery seed" as she hopes to become pregnant this time.⁶⁰ Throughout the duration of Adeliza's marriage to Henry, her lack of conception is paramount to her. Adeliza thinks of her failure to conceive as punishment from God.⁶¹ When Adeliza receives a letter from Matilda announcing her pregnancy, Adeliza is overjoyed at the news even as it reminds her that she herself cannot achieve this task.⁶² When Adeliza remarries after Henry's death, to William d'Albini, a loyal supporter of Stephen's, she not only finds sex enjoyable—and orgasms for what is likely the first time⁶³—but also almost immediately becomes pregnant, a prime example of the romance novel trope of the Mighty Wang: "restor[ing] the heroine to orgasm or fertility, or possibly both."⁶⁴

Adeliza's joy in motherhood is evident in her unorthodox approach to it, as she insists on breastfeeding her firstborn at least until her churching.⁶⁵ Her child, she states, is worth more than any earthly crown;⁶⁶ her ability to be a mother means more to her than her previous fixation on being a queen and dowager queen. And in this, Adeliza believes she can set an example for the unhappy-in-marriage Matilda: that Adeliza has managed to marry, bear children and be happy should be an example to Matilda.⁶⁷ In the end Adeliza makes the ultimate sacrifice for her children: suffering from an unnamed wasting disease, she makes the decision to withdraw to the abbey of Afflinghem to die so that her children do not have to see her go through the process of withering away and dying.⁶⁸ At every turn Adeliza is the Madonna-like mother, both in her sacrifices for her children as well as her approach to

Matilda, her stepdaughter; she is the modern picture of the perfect medieval mother even while transgressing medieval social norms, such as her desire to breastfeed.

Given the constant contrast in the personalities of the women, Matilda's approach to motherhood is unsurprisingly somewhat different. Her relationship with her first husband, Heinrich V, is represented as loving and respectful. Matilda assisted with governance, was respected by the court and people, and had even borne Heinrich a child though the son was "deformed" and died almost immediately.⁶⁹ These memories bring her to tears in her new life married to Geoffrey of Anjou.⁷⁰ Appalled by her marriage to someone much younger than her, Matilda learns a trick involving moss and vinegar to prevent conception in the hopes that without a pregnancy, an annulment would come.⁷¹ However when Geoffrey discovers her ruse and Matilda becomes pregnant, she changes tactic almost immediately: her child would be her heir and she would protect him, comparing it to going into battle for her unborn child.⁷² It is surprising, considering the time and consideration that Matilda gave to preventing pregnancy, that she does not then turn to finding ways to terminate the pregnancy, and this gives us one of the tensions of historical fiction: Matilda historically had sons by Geoffrey, so fiction cannot take that away, and that perhaps then governs what character development would take place in a non-historical fictional character. When fictional women find themselves with unwanted pregnancies by abusive husbands perhaps narrative would demand at least a consideration of abortion, but with a historical fiction character who is known to have borne children, that option does not exist. Regardless, when Matilda's first son by Geoffrey, the future Henry II, is born, she does not feel some rush of maternal love but the satisfaction of a job well done and gladness that this son is fully-formed.⁷³ Again she thinks of motherhood as a battlefield: Matilda has ostensibly had little control over her life, but the field of battle had changed as now she had a son to fight for.⁷⁴

From the birth of Henry, the struggle for Matilda's crown takes a backseat to note that it is now a struggle for Henry's inheritance. Even though Matilda works for others to acknowledge that Henry's right came through her,⁷⁵ the role of future ruler quickly becomes Henry's. At a very early age Henry is seen by Matilda as a future king: he is intelligent and focused, capable of playing chess with his half-brother—and winning—while keeping a steady eye on the activity of the room around him (284). He is displaying characteristics not likely of an average six-year-old, but is instead set above the other children to be seen already as a young king. Matilda knows that only she can give Henry the chance to be the king he already is.⁷⁶ At a later point she ruminates, but only for a moment, on the time she has to spend away from her children in order to secure the throne;⁷⁷ this is not nearly as overt a work-life balance crisis as seen in the *Penman*, but still a recognition of the cost of fighting for Henry's future right to rule. It is only late in the novel that we see Matilda reacting emotionally to her son: Henry appears unexpectedly at her court and she is overwhelmed with emotion, needing to excuse herself from the room so that no one would see her weep.⁷⁸ This also opens a rift between Henry and his mother, as Henry finds it embarrassing that his mother was overwhelmed with emotions. Henry thinks that he too had felt emotions on the reunion with his mother but had not felt the need to cry, because there is nothing to cry about. Henry here sets himself above his mother; even though she had been fighting for his rule Henry dismisses her as a mere woman because of both her crying and her inability to gain the throne: she had done what she could but she was “only a woman.” Henry himself already sees himself as the uncrowned king of England, setting himself above his mother as both a man and a ruler.⁷⁹

One very interesting, albeit brief, mention of motherhood comes from a moment actually dealing with a character peripheral to the main narrative. Stephen's wife Maheut, who is frequently described as dumpy but with her teeth in the throne like a terrier, is

considered as a motherly character, and thus one men would respect and follow, in contrast to Matilda's lack of motherliness:

[Maheut] was utterly loyal to Stephen, and her brisk, motherly manner engendered loyalty in others. When with Stephen in public, she kept her eyes lowered and her mouth closed, cultivating the persona of a modest, submissive wife...

The Empress had no such maternal image to temper her own abrasive nature. If she thought a man was a fool, she said so to his face in front of others, and gave no quarter. She was tall, slender, beautiful, desirable – like a mistress, and while few men would ever strike their mothers [many] would take a fist to a mistress...⁸⁰

In this we can immediately read a Madonna/whore dichotomy in which Matilda, the beautiful upstart, is the mistress in contrast to Maheut's motherliness. Even worse, this dichotomy is taken to violent extremes, justifying men's violence against Matilda, especially that from her husband Geoffrey. Matilda's lack of motherliness does not inspire at the very least respect from her men, with the implication that all men, with their respect for their own mothers, treat motherly women with that same respect. The Madonna/whore dichotomy is problematic enough, especially given that Maheut is a shadowy, two-dimensional secondary character; having a male character ruminate that Matilda's lack of motherliness justifies men not following her or even striking her becomes disturbing.

Through all this, it is in Adeliza's relationship with Matilda, who is nearly the same age, where we see another portrayal of not only motherhood but female friendship, and perhaps the most important relationship of the novel. Their first embrace upon Matilda's return from Germany reminds Matilda that her own mother was not soft and motherly, and she nearly cries at Adeliza's touch.⁸¹ In their friendship each supports the other, primarily through letters as they do not physically spend a great deal of time together, and their relationship transcends what we might think of as a stereotypical step-relationship to that of a mother-daughter relationship at times, and more like sisters at others. They were portrayed with two entirely different personalities but their bond was represented as one borne of affection, friendship, and kinship. When Matilda is broken and literally beaten, leaving

Geoffrey and staying with Adeliza, Adeliza sends for Matilda's imperial crown so that Matilda does not forget who she is: 'This is what you are. And no one can take that away from you – ever.'⁸² Adeliza further works to fix Matilda's image of power to strengthen Matilda: when Stephen usurps the throne, Adeliza, at great risk, again retrieves the imperial crowns and again sends them to Matilda, reminding Matilda that she is the rightful heir and that no one else should have her crowns.⁸³ Although at several points Adeliza struggles with her conflicting vows, with William d'Albini, her second husband, a supporter of Stephen's, she steadfastly believes that her first oath was to Henry and thus to Henry's daughter, her stepdaughter.⁸⁴ The mother-daughter bond between Matilda and Adeliza comes to play politically as well, as during several points of crucial political and narrative tension, William d'Albini decides to respect the mother-daughter bond of his wife and step-step-daughter rather than his political affiliation to Stephen.⁸⁵ When Matilda and Adeliza both retire from England, Matilda to return to Normandy and carry on governance there and Adeliza to her abbey to waste away and die, Matilda returns the support her stepmother has given her over the years by entreating her to be strong in front of her children as they depart. As they sail away with William and her children being left behind on the pier, Matilda keeps Adeliza from collapse by appealing to her motherhood and her status: "Do not let their last view be of you collapsed and weeping. You were my father's Queen and you are still your husband's. Do not fail him. Never forget that there is still a crown on your head, do you hear me? Never!"⁸⁶ Matilda tends to Adeliza after her children are out of site and she has collapsed in weakness and grief, and she ponders about what both of them had achieved and lost in their lives in their "journey from young womanhood to these middle years of supposed wisdom."⁸⁷ Their struggles as women and queens have become a journey of personal emancipation and growth.⁸⁸ But now the tables have turned, and now Matilda takes care of her friend, her sister, her stepmother in her time of need.

The bond between Matilda and Adeliza is presented as the most convincing and the most important bond between women, that of a combination of motherhood and daughterhood, sisterhood, and friendship. In fact it is this relationship, not between the women and their husbands or children, that is represented as one of the driving forces in their lives; moreso for Adeliza than Matilda, perhaps, though Matilda learns to respect her stepmother, as different as a person Adeliza is from Matilda.

Throughout Chadwick's novel we see another kind of Matilda and again a Matilda that is representative of early 2000s feminism. This is a Matilda who is still concerned, albeit lightly, about her work/life balance but brand new features are apparent in the twenty-first-century Matilda. The very concept of preventing conception, not previously seen despite the sea changes made in the mid-twentieth century, are seen here for the first time; some fifty years after oral contraception is available, an audience is deemed ready for a medieval women actively working to prevent conception. The twenty-first-century Matilda, also in a reflection of current feminism, also works with a notion that her friendships and female relationships are more important than those of the men around her, reflected in her relationship with Adeliza. No longer is Matilda governed by her relationship with her father, husband, or (male) children as seen in the Plaidy and Penman. In this the novel subverts the expectations that, as a medieval potential queen, her own motherhood would be paramount and instead Matilda becomes the daughter and the relationship with her stepmother is the spotlight. This alters the traditional power structure one expects in a medieval novel with two women's friendship holding the crux of the novel. This is a Matilda whose relationships have been strongly appropriated by contemporary feminism: no longer is the emphasis on her relationship with the men around her, but to the woman with whom she's closest: her stepmother.

Forty years of feminist fiction on the Empress Matilda closely aligns with the feminism at the time of writing, and one place where this is strongly evident is in Matilda's depiction with motherhood. From the emphasis on female power in the 1970s, with motherhood a means to that end, to the distressed and stressed mother of the 1990s, worried about having it all, to the adult mother-daughter relationship of the 2010s, with a good mother character recognized as more important than any man, feminist repainting of the Empress Matilda via fiction imposes a modern ideas of the medieval woman into wide readership. These impressions grow out of the widely available secondary literature, at the cost of sometimes neglecting post-feminist scholarly secondary work, but more importantly present a medieval woman who is broadly palatable to modern readers. Part of this is an explicit desire on the part of many modern authors to reinsert this woman into history or to rewrite the "known" history of Matilda.⁸⁹ This is something that is relatively viable and part of a strong second-wave critique of the academy, though remember this is not a woman who is somehow "lost" to history or historians.⁹⁰ But in seeking to reinsert Matilda into modern popular historical knowledge, most authors do no more than paint a Matilda who is appropriate for their time. Moreso these depictions of a modern "medieval" woman gives an audience an inauthentic idea of validating their current concerns by seeing it in a far-distant past. A medieval woman expressing the same concerns as her readers gives the modern reader a comfortable image of the past that confirms their concerns and images of the present, whichever that present may be.⁹¹ The last few decades of fiction on the Empress Matilda closely aligns with the feminism at the time of writing, and one place where this is strongly evident is in Matilda's depiction with motherhood, making Matilda a modern mother for modern readers.

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¹ Fiona Tolhurst, *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Translation of Female Kingship*

(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 16.

² K.R. Potter, ed. and trans., *Gesta Stephani* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950, reprinted 1976, 2004.)

³ Cf. Charles Beem, *The Lionness Roared: The Problems of Female Rule in English History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Marjorie Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother and Lady of the English* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1991); Tolhurst, 2013.

⁴ Marjorie Chibnall, “The Charters of the Empress Matilda,” in *Law and Government in Medieval England and Normandy*, ed. George Garnett and John Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 276.

⁵ In this piece the term “post-feminist” or “post-feminism” is used to indicate the world after the second-wave feminist movement, not to imply the sometimes-suggested current phase of “post-feminism.”

⁶ Kate Ellie, “Gimme Shelter: Feminism, Fantasy and Women’s Popular Fiction,” in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 225.

⁷ Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1841), accessed 16 December 2014,

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⁸ Jean Plaidy, *The Passionate Enemies* (London: Pan, 1976).

⁹ Sharon Penman, *When Christ and His Saints Slept* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Chadwick, *Lady of the English* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks/Landmark, 2011).

¹¹ This leaves out two other novels featuring Matilda as a protagonist. The first is Ellen Jones' *The Fatal Crown*, published in 1991 by Simon & Schuster with a paperback reprint from Avon Books, and rather more firmly in the realm of historical romance (the author, perhaps unsurprisingly, credits Nesta Pain's popular biography of Matilda from 1978 as 'having particularly stimulated my imagination,' 556.) Although the book had an initial print run of 100,000 (Reed Business Information Review 1990 via Amazon, <http://www.amazon.com/The-Fatal-Crown-Ellen-Jones/dp/0380717077>, accessed 23 February 2015) it does not seem to have found wide readership although its recent reissue as an e-book might warrant a new audience. The second is Haley Elizabeth Garwood's *The Forgotten Queen*, published in 1998 by the small press The Writer's Block (West Virginia, US.) This, via a small press with a small print run, also did not find a wider audience. However both novels carry on with Jean Plaidy's fictional devise of Matilda and Stephen having a sexual relationship resulting in Henry, thus providing a narratively satisfying ending of the child of the two combatants eventually receiving the throne of England. Whilst outside the broader scope of this paper, these two novels alongside Plaidy's may warrant further attention in the exploration of this narrative trope in admittedly small body of Matildan fiction.

This chapter is also focusing on novels with Matilda as the protagonist, declining to study novels where she appears as a secondary character such as Ken Follet's *Pillars of the Earth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) and E.L. Konigsburg's *A Fine Taste for Scarlet and Miniver* (1973).

¹² Bruce Lambert, "Eleanor Hibbert, Novelist Known as Victoria Holt and Jean Plaidy," *The New York Times*, January 21, 1993, accessed 16 December 2014,

<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/21/books/eleanor-hibbert-novelist-known-as-victoria-holt-and-jean-plaidy.html>.

¹³ Allison Light, “‘Young Bess’: Historical Novels and Growing Up,” *Feminist Review* 33 (Autumn 1989), 61.

¹⁴ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 29-30.

¹⁵ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 80, 82.

¹⁶ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 109.

¹⁷ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 135.

¹⁸ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 135.

¹⁹ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 140.

²⁰ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 141.

²¹ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 142.

²² Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 147.

²³ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 153-5.

²⁴ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 155.

²⁵ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 179.

²⁶ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 196.

²⁷ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 149.

²⁸ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 149.

²⁹ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 157.

³⁰ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 228.

³¹ Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 303.

³² Plaidy, *Passionate Enemies*, 312.

³³ Lauri Umansky, *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 11.

³⁴ Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973).

³⁵ Abortion Act 1967.

³⁶ Penman, *Slept*, 60.

³⁷ Penman, *Slept*, 40-2.

³⁸ Penman, *Slept*, 58-9.

³⁹ Penman, *Slept*, 98, 136.

⁴⁰ [cite Leyser xx]

⁴¹ Penman, *Slept*, 240.

⁴² Penman, *Slept*, 240.

⁴³ Penman, *Slept*, 316-17.

⁴⁴ Penman, *Slept*, 99.

⁴⁵ Penman, *Slept*, 295.

⁴⁶ Penman, *Slept*, 295.

⁴⁷ Penman, *Slept*, 418.

⁴⁸ Penman, *Slept*, 421.

⁴⁹ Penman, *Slept*, 850, 858, 870.

⁵⁰ Penman, *Slept*, 37.

⁵¹ Penman, *Slept*, 34.

⁵² Penman, *Slept*, 61-2.

⁵³ Penman, *Slept*, 173.

⁵⁴ Penman, *Slept*, 279.

⁵⁵ Penman, *Slept*, 737.

⁵⁶ Penman, *Slept*, 740.

⁵⁷ R. Clare Snyder-Hall, 'Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of "Choice,"' *Perspectives on Politics* 8(1) (2010): 259.

⁵⁸ Umansky, *Motherhood*, 132; 159-60.

⁵⁹ Umansky, *Motherhood*, 160.

⁶⁰ Chadwick, *Lady*, 8.

⁶¹ Chadwick, *Lady*, 32.

⁶² Chadwick, *Lady*, 146.

⁶³ Chadwick, *Lady*, 260-3.

⁶⁴ Sarah Wendell, "The Bitchery Glossary," *Smart Bitches Trashy Books*, November 11, 2011. <http://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/2011/11/the-bitchery-glossary/>

⁶⁵ Chadwick, *Lady*, 272-3.

⁶⁶ Chadwick, *Lady*, 274.

⁶⁷ Chadwick, *Lady*, 281.

⁶⁸ Chadwick, *Lady*, 502.

⁶⁹ Chadwick, *Lady*, 1-4, 15, 140, 143-4.

⁷⁰ Chadwick, *Lady*, 143-4.

⁷¹ Chadwick, *Lady*, 88-9, 91.

⁷² Chadwick, *Lady*, 147.

⁷³ Chadwick, *Lady*, 149.

⁷⁴ Chadwick, *Lady*, 150.

⁷⁵ Chadwick, *Lady*, 186.

⁷⁶ Chadwick, *Lady*, 285.

⁷⁷ Chadwick, *Lady*, 375.

⁷⁸ Chadwick, *Lady*, 428-9.

⁷⁹ Chadwick, *Lady*, 430-1.

⁸⁰ Chadwick, *Lady*, 327.

⁸¹ Chadwick, *Lady*, 25-6.

⁸² Chadwick, *Lady*, 114.

⁸³ Chadwick, *Lady*, 192.

⁸⁴ Chadwick, *Lady*, 257.

⁸⁵ Chadwick, *Lady*, 280-2, 415-18.

⁸⁶ Chadwick, *Lady*, 510.

⁸⁷ Chadwick, *Lady*, 511.

⁸⁸ Ealasaid Munro, 'Feminism: A Fourth Wave?' *Political Insight* 4(2) (September 2013): 22-25. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/2041-9066.12021/full> Accessed 26 Feb 2015.

⁸⁹ Lambert, "Eleanor Hibbert"; Garwood, *Forgotten Queen*, vii-viii; Penman, *Christ*, 909; Chadwick, *Lady*, 522.

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⁹¹ Ellie, 'Gimme Shelter.'